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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000847

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MARKARYAN'S STATEMENT ON ARMENIA-TURKEY BORDER
OPENING MORE ABOUT COVER THAN FACTS

Classified By: DCM A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A loosely translated May 12 statement by Armenian Prime Minister Andranik Markaryan regarding the possible opening of the Armenia-Turkey border by the end of the year sparked speculation in Yerevan about potential developments in the bilateral relationship. The statement, which appears totally disconnected from any developments or political reality, is likely an attempt by Markaryan to temper earlier, more aggressive statements he made regarding Turkey during May 9 commemoration events. MFA contacts told Post May 13 that they were surprised by Markaryan's comments and, while always hopeful for a breakthrough on the border issue, they unfortunately had no news to report on the subject. End Summary.

MARKARYAN MAKES PREDICTIONS, SPARKS SPECULATION

2. (C) During a May 12 press conference marking his fifth year in office as Prime Minister, Andranik Markaryan stated that the GOAM and GOT would work to open the Armenia-Turkey border "by the end of 2005." Loosely translated versions of the statement were widely carried in the local media, sparking speculation about a possible breakthrough or policy shift on the issue. Markaryan predicted that an open border with Turkey would not adversely affect local markets or producers as some in Armenia fear. He reminded reporters of similar fears that circulated before Armenia launched trade relations with Iran and noted the already steady flow of goods from Turkey that arrive in Armenia via Georgia.

MFA: UNFORTUNATELY, NO NEWS

3. (C) When questioned about Markaryan's statement, MFA contacts told us May 13 that they were surprised by the comments and confirmed that there was no substantial news to report on the issue. (Note: We believe that we were in fact the ones to first alert the MFA to the statement early May 13. While there has been a recent shift in MFA staff who follow Turkish issues (septel), the Turkish Desk and Middle East Affairs Department Chief are extremely well connected on the policy scene and would have been aware of a significant policy announcement well in advance. End Note.) The MFA added that, while always hopeful for a breakthrough on the border issue, they did not see any immediate change in sight, especially given what appeared to be an impasse between President Robert Kocharian and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan on the issue of the GOT's proposal for a joint commission to study the facts surrounding the events of 1914-15. In addition, the MFA was not optimistic regarding a rumored meeting between the two leaders in Warsaw May 16-17 during the Council of Europe Summit.

COMMENT

4. (C) While still the major figure within the ranks of the Republican Party and by no means reluctant to take a stand on tough policy issues, Markaryan tends to shy away from questions regarding foreign relations. This tendency makes Markaryan's recent proclamations on Turkey even more interesting. His May 12 statement, which appears totally disconnected from any developments or political reality, is likely an attempt to temper earlier, more aggressive statements he made in both public and private settings regarding Turkey during May 9 commemoration events. Such assertions are not an unusual political talking points in Yerevan (and are even the usual mantra for some parties including the ARF Dashnak Party); these earlier statements by the PM, however, were not in line with the GOAM's official party line as expressed by Foreign Minister Oskanian. We suspect, and our contacts confirm for now, that Markaryan was instructed to clarify the GOAM stance on relations with Turkey and in so doing may have over-delivered and somewhat

distorted expectations for the moment.
EVANS